The Indianness of Ezekiel's 'Indian English' Poems: An Analysis

Vinoda Kumar
Shiv Kumar

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss1/5

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
The Indianness of Ezekiel's 'Indian English' Poems: An Analysis

Abstract
The response of scholars to Ezekiel's 'Indian English' poems has always alternated between amusement and disapproval; very few have taken them seriously enough to see that they bring into sharp focus the sensibility that informs the characteristic Indian modes of thought and behaviour. It seems as if the comedy of the low-grade Indian English employed by the poet as an artistic strategy in these poems has altogether distracted attention away from the underlying purpose. The apparently light-hearted treatment of the subject in them has led scholars to think that the poet has 'quietly gone to seed'. Even when occasionally a perceptive scholar like Sivaramakrishna feels that the 'ultimate significance' of Ezekiel's 'Indian English' poems has not often been realised, he merely regards them as symptomatic of the predicament of Indo-English poets 'whoring after English gods'. This view leaves much to be said about the 'significance' of these poems.
The Indianness of Ezekiel’s ‘Indian English’ Poems: An Analysis

The response of scholars to Ezekiel’s ‘Indian English’ poems has always alternated between amusement and disapproval; very few have taken them seriously enough to see that they bring into sharp focus the sensibility that informs the characteristic Indian modes of thought and behaviour. It seems as if the comedy of the low-grade Indian English employed by the poet as an artistic strategy in these poems has altogether distracted attention away from the underlying purpose. The apparently light-hearted treatment of the subject in them has led scholars to think that the poet has ‘quietly gone to seed’. Even when occasionally a perceptive scholar like Sivaramakrishna feels that the ‘ultimate significance’ of Ezekiel’s ‘Indian English’ poems has not often been realised, he merely regards them as symptomatic of the predicament of Indo-English poets ‘whoring after English gods’. This view leaves much to be said about the ‘significance’ of these poems.

Ezekiel’s ‘Indian English’ poems, in our view, are remarkable as they focus on those Indian modes of social behaviour which ill-assort with those of the English, reflecting thereby a typical post-colonial, cross-cultural situation. This paper is meant to present an analysis of the contextual and formal deviations that the language of these poems simulates with a view to underlining some aspects of Indian character. Indeed, the title, Very Indian Poems in Indian English sets the tone of these poems even as it defines their parameters on the thematic and stylistic levels. The title not only furnishes a frame of reference, but also a standard of judgement. It must be noted that the title is not value-neutral, but insists on calling attention to the Indian character of the subject and style with the intensifier ‘very’. One may also see a note of irony in the intensifier.

One of the remarkable creative choices that the poet appears to have made in writing these poems is to set up inadequate bilinguals for his
personae. Several advantages flow from such a choice. They enable the poet to represent the average Indian whom no one, at least in India, will have difficulty in recognising. More important, this strategy helps the poet put their Indianess in bold relief. For when an average Indian expresses himself in English, the deviations from the L1 variety of English that invariably appear in his speech reveal his socio-linguistic background. The speakers in Ezekiel’s poems are all the kind of inadequate bilinguals whose English, working by default, allows a glimpse of their cultural and linguistic differentiae. To be sure, these poems would have been less Indian and far less amusing had Ezekiel chosen more Westernised speakers whose English approximates the standard British variety.

A Western reader of these poems is bound to find them decidedly unEnglish, not merely because the speakers here are Indian, but because the attitudes, assumptions and expressions manifest in their speech are distinctly Indian. The three poems examined here offer transpositions of a speech whose underlying assumptions of speaker-listener relationship, in the given circumstances, are basically Indian. The poet’s perceptions of the Indian prototype offered in the poems, ‘The Professor’, ‘The Patriot’, and ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’ could be verified as we go along from authoritative sources external to the poems.

Among the features of the Indian character represented by the poems are: (a) a free-wheeling, no-holds-barred sociability; (b) a breathless tempo of speech; and (c) an unrational — not irrational — approach to men and matters. These features are, of course, blended organically with a complex of other such features in the personality that emerges from the poems, but they are separately examined here for purposes of analysis.

The most striking aspect of the speakers in these poems is the easy and intimate relationship they establish even when the position of the listener warrants a degree of distance. The listeners in the three poems are (a) a former student, (b) a visitor, and (c) a gathering of people. The all-out breezy camaraderie, the uninhibited sociability displayed by the speakers towards their listeners should come home directly to the Indian readers while the English should find this approach baffling. Unlike the average Indian, the WASP character is especially noted for self-reliance and reticence. An openly confessional speech, emotional permissiveness and demonstrative display of personal feelings would be considered, in the given situation, decidedly unEnglish. The English language, known for irony and understatement, is yoked in Ezekiel’s poems to a sensibility that is not given to inwardness and to the exclusive sense of privacy in
social interaction. The expectations of social behaviour which the English language brings with it are completely upset in these poems. The incompatibility of the English language and Indian behaviour that we find in these poems could be traced to the cultural and social differences between the two societies. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, known for astute observation of these differences, has concluded his discussion of these with the words: ‘It is this *comédie humaine*, this large-hearted wiping out of the distinction between public and private affairs, this craving for sympathy in widest commonalty spread, that make us recoil from the dreariness of the public behaviour of the English people.’¹⁵ Many instances of characteristic Indian manners discussed by Chaudhuri in ‘The Eternal Silence of These Infinite Crowds’ in *A Passage to England* help us appreciate fully the authenticity of the Indian modes of social behaviour represented in Ezekiel’s poems examined here. The speakers in ‘The Professor’ and ‘The Patriot’ are eager to talk about their private opinions and lives with persons who could be regarded as strangers in much the same way as the stranger whom Nirad Chaudhuri meets at a Delhi bus stop.⁶ This effusive sociability, characteristic of Indian ways, may also be observed in the farewell address in ‘Goodbye Party’: here too the speaker brings an intimate, informal, and confessional attitude to a formal occasion.

In ‘The Patriot’ the anonymous speaker begins with an unabashed self-dramatisation, bemoans the declining values in public affairs, freely offers advice as well as ‘lassi’, and closes his discourse by inviting the listener to visit again. The declamation in ‘The Professor’ and in ‘Goodbye Party’ is unwithholding and chatty. Both freely mix private affairs with public ones. The harangues of the patriot as well as of the professor are for ever ready to take on a high moral tone. Both castigate, admonish and exhort alternately. The patriot’s peroration ends on a note of elevating pious sentiment (‘One day Ram Rajya is sure coming’) just as Professor Sheth’s spiel inexorably moves on to the moral, ‘we have to change with times’.

Alongside this moral note, lack of specificity and focus also characterise the speech in the three poems. The habits formed by close community living, by simplicity and religiosity have contributed to produce a social life in India where such loud, intimate, and desultory conversation has become the norm; this conversation is often spiced with edifying generalisations. Raju’s goofy apotheosis into sainthood in R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide* is founded on his great ability to play to the tastes of the simple rural folk who like nothing better than edifying moral sentiments and desultory conversation. Indian readers of Ezekiel’s ‘Indian
English’ poems would readily find them congenial primarily because they adopt the assumptions of speaker-listener relations common to the native culture although they look out of place in English.

Another recognisably Indian feature of these poems is the tempo and rhythms of speech that they simulate. The irrepressible loquacity of the speakers represented here is all the more remarkable considering the woeful ineptness with which they handle English; inadequate mastery of English does not seem to thwart them. The rapid flow of their monologues rushes on with many digressions, asides, philosophical declamations and generalisations. Such a pace is considered typically Indian because Indians are said to ‘think quickly, talk quickly ... move quickly’. Raja Rao has given us convincing proof of this aspect in his novel *Kanthapura* through an exquisite simulation of Indian traditional narrative styles and speech habits. The pace and tempo of the speech in Ezekiel’s Indian poems is as breathless as it is in Raja Rao’s novel. The difference between the two approaches, however, is one of translation and original. Strangely enough, when we read the English of *Kanthapura*, we feel we are reading a native Indian language. But in Ezekiel’s poems the reading experience is neither that of an Indian language nor of Standard British English; it is a form of English that is recognisably Indian in many respects. The English in Ezekiel’s poems is of L1 interference variety, used mainly for the limited purpose of throwing light on a set of attitudes peculiar to inter-personal relationships in India. On the other hand Raja Rao transplants Indian spirit by fashioning an English that is suited to the ambitious artistic purpose of bringing to life the ethos and the spirit of rural India. That is, while Ezekiel uses ‘Indian English’, Raja Rao uses an Indianised English. However, what is common to both is that they succeed in capturing in their language the speech rhythms and the tempo characteristic of common Indian modes of speech. The speakers in Ezekiel’s poems are all heavy-duty monologuers and excellent raconteurs in the fashion of Achakka, the old brahmin widow of Kanthapura who narrates the story. Exuberance and a flowing, sing-song patterned repetitiousness are the essential features of their speech. Consider these examples:

Pakistan behaving like this.
China behaving like that.
It is making me very sad, I am telling you.

(‘The Patriot’)

One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank Manager,
Both have cars.

(‘The Professor’)

24
The rhythmic movement of the speech here is likely to be mistaken for merely a metrical device common to verse. But the sing-song manner in which the monologue tumbles is actually the way in which the common Indian folk speak. To appreciate this better, all one needs to do is to recall the rapid flow of the rhythmic speech of the villagers in Kanthapura: ‘«They say Rangamma is all for Mahatma. We are all for the Mahatma. Pariah Rachanna’s wife, Rachi and Sethamma and Thimmamma are all for the Mahatma. They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man’s country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma»’ (p. 257). The speech of the poems shares with that in Kanthapura the garrulous and gossipy style. Although Ezekiel’s speakers use a cliché-ridden and deviant English, their loquacity comes through nevertheless. They confirm Chaudhuri’s view: ‘A very large number of us are indeed glib in English, but glibness and expressiveness are not synonymous … the majority of the speakers of English employ a conventional diction for putting across conventional ideas.’

Among other related Indian characteristics that the speech in Ezekiel’s poems manifests is a certain old-world naiveté and an attitude that, in the average Indian, negates method and reason. An almost child-like simplicity announces itself when, for example, the patriot expresses his concern about the growing violence in the world; in the same vein he wonders why people do not follow Gandhi. After holding forth in this vein for some time, he finally invites his visitor in these terms:

But you will visit again?
Any time, any day.
I am not believing in ceremony.
Always I am enjoying your company.

Such an unaffected plainness conceals an inability to consider mutual convenience when an invitation is extended. But the concept of meeting or visiting by appointment is itself alien to the average Indian. One recalls what a shock it was to the Englishwoman, Adela Quested in A Passage to India, when Mrs Bhattacharya similarly asks her to visit her saying ‘all days are convenient’. Forster was not portraying an uncommon situation when eventually he shows Bhattacharyas failing to send the promised carriage on the appointed day. This, however, does not mean that lack of sincerity is an Indian trait. One could possibly trace this indifference to a lack of method and to deep-seated habits of communal behaviour. V.S. Naipaul has traced the present crisis of India to ‘turning away from the mind (on which the sacred Gita lays such stress)’. But Naipaul’s postulates in this regard are valid only in relation
to the folk culture and not the modern Indian culture. Ezekiel's representation of Indian habits of social behaviour are similarly those of common folk.

As for the Indianness at the formal level, the poems under study offer a rich variety of examples in which one can observe innumerable 'interlanguage' features. Indian English being basically an interference variety, one can expect to find an increasingly greater interference of L1 in the language here. The interference could be observed mainly at the level of grammar, collocation, lexis, etc. The Indian English used by Ezekiel's speakers also shares a feature which comes from an exclusive exposure to written forms of English in the Second Language situation: a bookish, florid and formal style.

Unlike the English used in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, the language in Ezekiel's poems is deviant at both semantic and formal levels. Whitworth has described this kind of English as a substandard variety. As such, it generally figures on the wrong side of the acceptability scale. We are concerned here only with those deviations which are possibly caused by L1 influence and which in some way qualify to be called Indian.

Some of the most striking examples of the strident intrusion of L1 in the English of these poems could be observed in its *be + verb + ing* constructions. In Hindi as well as in most other Indian languages the tendency is to add progressive to even those verbs which in Standard English do not occur in the progressive tenses because of what is known as the selectional restriction rules. When patterns of use found in L1 are translated into English, we have such forms as the underlined ones observed in the language of Ezekiel's speakers:

'I am standing for peace...'
'I am simply not understanding...'
'Everyday I'm reading Times of India...'

('The Patriot')

'I am living just on opposite house's backside...'

('The Professor')

'his wife was cooking nicely...'
'I am always appreciating...'
'Pushpa Miss is never saying no...'

In Standard English the ordinary order of words in declaratives is inverted to express an interrogation, but in Indian languages the word-order (excepting the question-word) is usually that of the assertive sentence even in the interrogative. The English produced in an Indian context often does away with the inversion and the DO-insertion rules in
interrogatives and uses wrong question tags. Ezekiel’s speakers offer many such examples:

‘You want one glass lassi?’
‘What you think of prospects of world peace?’
‘All men are brothers, no?’

(‘The Patriot’) 

In the use of articles, too, the language of Ezekiel’s personae manifests many instances of inter-language interference. The Indian tendency to abuse English articles was noted long ago by Whitworth and this could be noted in the language here, too:

‘You want one glass lassi?’
‘With little salt lovely drink...’

(‘The Patriot’) 

‘Miss Pushpa is coming from very high family.’

(‘Goodbye Party’) 

‘One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank Manager...’
‘This is price of old age.’

(‘The Professor’) 

With the exception of the first, all the other examples here are to be noted for the absence of the required article. In the first example, ‘one’ takes the place of ‘a’ because, as mentioned by Whitworth, it is a carry-over of the single number ek in L₁. Close examination of specific examples of such use is bound to lead the enquiry either to the influence of L₁ or simply to ignorance of the correct use of articles.

The incidence of inter-language interference becomes even more apparent in the kind of loan-shifts, loan-blends and loan-translations that Ezekiel’s Indian speakers use here. Examples such as ‘Indira behn’, ‘goonda fellow’, ‘Ram Rajya’, ‘Hindiwallahs’, etc. need little explanation to show that they are derivative.

These poems offer many instances of Indianisms where, unlike in Standard English, the qualifier moves into the place of a modifier. It is true that in contemporary British English this practice is observed in such instances as ‘information retrieval’, ‘student participation’, etc., but this is being done only to produce a more compact, condensed noun group. In Ezekiel’s poems, however, this analogy is over-extended to produce expressions which strain acceptability. Some examples of this are: ‘student unrest fellow’ (‘The Patriot’), ‘Goodbye Party’, ‘My uncle’s
very old friend’ (‘Goodbye Party’), ‘opposite house’s backside’ (‘The Professor’), etc. The underlying structure of some of these neologisms is non-deviant, but the realized structures are deviant. They can be explained only in terms of the peculiar semantic and grammatical patterns of the Indian variety of English. This phenomenon may also be the result of a simplification process indulged to an excess by the Indian user of English either in ignorance or as a part of easier communicational strategies.

Ezekiel’s Indian English poems also offer examples of collocations which are essentially culture-bound. Such collocations as ‘brothers and sisters’, ‘our dear sister’ (in ‘Goodbye Party’) may be regarded as the outcome of transfer from L1 expressions peculiar to Indian social mores: they belong to the category of such carry-overs from L1 as ‘cherisher of the poor’, ‘bow my forehead’, ‘Oh, Maharaj’, ‘rape-sister’, ‘jewel of jewels’, etc. found in the novels of M.R. Anand, Raja Rao and others. The impact of culture on the formal features of Indian English could also be discerned in such collocations as ‘you were so thin, like stick’ (‘The Professor’). In such instances the L1 meanings are transferred to L2 items of English, and in the process what is produced is an idiom that is unEnglish.

Other varieties of collocational violations observed in the poems are ‘no blood-pressure’, ‘no heart-attack’, ‘sound habits’, ‘humble residence’, ‘what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa’, ‘family members’ (in ‘The Professor’ and ‘Goodbye Party’), etc. Although they are most commonly used by Indian speakers of English, they clearly remain as mistakes and as such are rejected by the acrolect speakers of English in India.

It may also be noted that some of the most striking features of the style of English used by Ezekiel’s speakers are glibness, pedantry, verbosity, and bookishness. R.C. Goffin, A.F. Kindersley, Samuel Mathai, Braj B. Kachru and Nirad C. Chaudhuri have made pointed reference to these attributes of the popular style of Indian English. The style of English in these poems depends heavily for effect on the high-falutin, hackneyed phrases (‘Friends, Romans countrymen’ etc., ‘Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception’ etc., ‘Every family must have black sheep’, ‘How many issues you have?’ etc.), pleonastic expressions (‘total teetotaller, completely total’, etc.) in place of simple ones, pretentious rhetoric (‘Ancient Indian wisdom is 100% correct’, etc.), alliterative repetitiousness (‘our progress is progressing’), register mixing (‘and hope to score century’), and other such Indianisms.

The language in Ezekiel’s poems not only incorporates many of the features discussed here but uses them to a telling effect. The disparity
between what one has learnt to expect from Standard English and what one finds manifested in the 'Indian English' here has thus become a great creative opportunity for the poet to light up some aspects of the common Indian personality.

NOTES

3. These are less well-educated users of English who, in India, include civil servants and professionals. They could be ranked around the central point of Derek Bickerton's scale which has at the lowest point the basilect, at the centre the mesolect, followed by acrolect at the highest level. Braj B. Kachru’s Cline of bilingualism also provides similar gradations. On Kachru’s scale, too, deviations from the Standard variety progressively increase as one descends from the highest point where the proficiency approximates Standard English. (See Kachru, *The Indianization of English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Paroo Nihalani, R.K. Tongue, and Priya Hosali, *Indian and British English: A Handbook of Usage and Pronunciation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).)
4. Saul Bellow draws our attention to the difference of WASP character in the opening paragraph of his novel, *Dangling Man*.
6. Ibid., pp. 93-4.
7. Raja Rao, 'Foreword' to *Kanthapura* (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, n.d.), p. 6. Further references to this novel are cited within parentheses at the end of quotations in the text of the article.
11. George Clifford Whitworth wrote: ‘As in the Indian languages there is no definite article corresponding to our the, nor any indefinite one corresponding to our a or an, except the occasional use of the first numeral (ek) when the single number requires to be especially expressed, it is naturally extremely difficult for any Indian to know when to use one article or the other, or none at all.’ See his *Indian English: An Examination of Errors of Idioms made by Indians in Writing English* (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1982), p. 11.